

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Metro Regional Report

BACKGROUND

In 2010, the Extension Center for Family Development at the University of Minnesota launched a project to learn more about the current and future issues affecting families in Minnesota. During this environmental scan project, community-level interviews were conducted in 11 different regions of the state. This report summarizes the community-level interviews conducted in metro Minnesota.

THE INTERVIEWS

Eight members of the Extension team interviewed 24 representatives from diverse organizations in the region about issues they see facing the families they serve. For the purposes of this environmental scan, the metro region of Minnesota was defined as the following counties: Anoka, Hennepin, Ramsey, Carver, Scott, and Dakota.



In an effort to hear as many community viewpoints as possible, interviews were conducted with organizations that represent different sectors (private, government, or nonprofit), locations, and types of families in the region. In the metro region, interviewees represented health organizations, educational institutions, faith-based organizations, culturally-specific organizations, government agencies, and private businesses. The organizations interviewed served all types of families, including families with young and/or school-aged children, college students, and/or older adults. Several organizations focus specifically on serving immigrant and refugee families.

Although this small group of community representatives cannot speak for the full diversity of the region, they provide important knowledge and insights into the lives of families in metro Minnesota. While many interviewees focused on issues specific to their organization, distinct themes emerged during the interviews that cut across the individual sectors, locations, and focus areas of the different organizations. These themes help paint a picture of the regional climate and culture facing families at the time the interviews were conducted.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR ISSUES AFFECTING FAMILIES IN THE METRO?

Many families in the region face economic and financial challenges. Interviewees discussed the effects of the poor national economy on families, particularly low-income families and those in poverty. They described the connection between economic hardship and education. Youth dealing with financial hardship face additional challenges at school. Lack of adequate education is closely connected to employment. Many jobs require education beyond high school but without sufficient family income, many families are not able to finance post-secondary education. Interviewees noted that many of the economic and financial issues experienced by families are exacerbated for the minority and immigrant populations.

Interviewees discussed the impact economic and financial hardship has had on families' health. For example, unemployment and underemployment diminish access to health insurance and medical treatment. Economic and financial hardship can also restrict families' ability to obtain healthy food and fresh produce. Interviewees

noted that economic hardship can lead to high stress levels and other mental and behavioral health issues, such as substance abuse. They said more families need basic assistance – housing, transportation, clothing, etc. – to get their basic needs met. One interviewee described how low-income families' barriers to finding safe housing leads to further health issues for families.

"If one of them doesn't go, the others fall down — like a domino effect — and health is the premier. If you don't have health, you can't go to school. If you're not healthy, you're going to call in and be absent or sick that day from work, and you're not going to create any wealth creation, and so it is all intertwined."

- Health Services Provider

Health is another issue impacting families. As mentioned, health is closely tied to economic and financial hardship. Interviews also discussed the connection between health and education. Several noted the importance of early childhood development on school readiness. Parents need more education on the connection between healthy development and school readiness as well as child development. Many interviewees saw a need for parents to address their children's development needs early and throughout their lives.

Interviewees described health issues that can impede children's learning, such as untreated illness or medical conditions that distract students in school or lead to frequent absences from school. One interviewee said that dental care plays an important role in education, noting that "a child with a mouth that hurts can't concentrate." Interviewees discussed health issues related to the schools themselves, particularly unhealthy foods served in

school lunches and school vending machines. One interviewee stressed the importance of parents teaching their children life skills, such as cooking and nutrition, so that they will be better prepared to face health challenges.

Many interviewees focused on the health of immigrant communities specifically. They noted that some families from these communities have culturally-based fears about the U.S. health care system. Many do not know what to expect from doctors and health care providers. One interviewee discussed Southeast Asian families' culturally-based approaches to treating cancer and the need to provide more education on cancer causes, screening, and treatment options in the U.S. health care system. Interviewees noted that immigrant families' language barriers can lead to misunderstanding of medical information and misdiagnosis. Additionally, many refugees suffer mental health issues, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as well as other physical health issues. Interviewees felt that the combined effect of a poor economy, limited access to health care, and cultural health barriers disproportionately impact the health of the region's immigrant populations.

Immigrant families face unique challenges. Besides unique health issues, immigrant families face challenges adjusting to a new culture. Interviewees described how language barriers and unfamiliarity with U.S. systems can make everyday tasks – going to the grocery store, banking, accessing needed services, etc. – difficult for many New Americans. Many also face challenges with larger issues, like accessing legal support and finding adequate employment. Interviewees noted that many New Americans have difficulty finding "good jobs" with adequate pay and benefits due to no or insufficient education. Even if an immigrant has education and training from their country of origin, it is often not recognized by U.S. employers.

Immigrant families also face a variety of issues related to family relationships. Interviewees noted the generational discrepancies families face when youth adapt to American culture more quickly than

"They're raising their family in a complete brand new country that has a different culture, different expectations, different communication styles, and skills and knowledge. The children are caught in between the two worlds — between the mainstream society and their indigenous community. Mothers and father[s] may not understand the mainstream culture, and may not be able to communicate [in] the language their children are speaking."

- Social Worker

their parents. This situation can impact parenting, discipline, education, and overall well-being of families. They discussed the challenges of balancing traditionally male-dominated cultures or cultures that value high respect for elders with the American culture. Interviewees described how these internal family struggles sometimes result in family violence, conflicting parenting styles, and relationship difficulties within extended families. Youth from immigrant families often struggle with personal and cultural identity, which can in turn affect mental health and behavior. Interviewees stressed the importance of helping New Americans find a balance between honoring their traditional cultures while adjusting to a new one in the United States.

Education is an issue for many families in the region. As noted, economic and health issues have a significant impact on youth education. Several interviewees noted instances where families' lack of resources hinders children's ability to concentrate and learn. For example, when youth attend school sick or are cold because their family cannot afford winter clothes, they will not be able to focus on school work. Interviewees described how some youth were unable to attend school consistently due to homelessness, unstable housing, or chronic illness. They said that many of these issues stem from poverty or financial hardship and that they disproportionately affect minority and immigrant youth. Interviewees mentioned several areas where families, educational institutions, and the community should work together to ensure children are healthy enough to learn everything school offers.

STRENGTHENING THE METRO REGION

The themes that emerged in the metro Minnesota region cover a broad range of issues affecting families. The issues related to the economy and finances, health, immigrants, and education reflect the national and political culture, as well as reveal issues unique to their communities. While 24 interviews fall short of representing the entire metro Minnesota region, they do offer a valuable glimpse into the climate and underlying culture of the region.

Although families in the metro region face significant barriers, interviewees named a number of ways the community can help meet the challenges. Several discussed the importance of building collaborations and partnerships, organizations' responsibility to reach out to the community, and the community's ability to support families. They described the community as a "foundation" and stressed the need to use a community-wide approach to address issues and make changes. By strengthening community relationships among individuals, families, and organizations, as well as utilizing the community as a foundation for change, more can be done to combat the issues facing families in the region.

MORE INFORMATION

The environmental scan in metro Minnesota was conducted by Rose Allen, Rosemary Heins, Sue Hooper, Phalla Keo, Sharmyn Phipps, Felisha Rhodes, Suzanne Sheridan, and Shelley Sherman, Extension Educators and program coordinators with the University of Minnesota. University of Minnesota Extension Center for Family Development staff members – Ali Shurilla, Mary Marczak, Jon Fu, and Heather Lee – assisted in the development of this report. For more information on the environmental scans, visit www.extension.umn.edu/family/environmental-scan/. For more information about the metro Minnesota environmental scan report, contact Rosemary Heins (heins002@umn.edu; 1-888-241-0719).

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